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Issue: *Foods for Health in the 21st Century***Consumer response: the paradoxes of food and health**

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The papers in the session “Food Culture and Consumer Response,” show how important people’s values, beliefs, aspirations and social context are to their dietary health. They also reveal several tensions that shape consumer responses to healthy food. This essay discusses the paradoxical nature of eating habits in general, and describes three paradoxes related specifically to the challenges of providing food for health in the 21st century: pleasure/health, technology/nature, innovation/nostalgia.

The papers in this session “Food Culture and Consumer Response” investigate the complex and variable factors that influence people’s beliefs and behaviors when it comes to eating a healthy diet. While scientific investigation and innovation can teach us how foods affect our bodily functions and provide new mechanisms for delivering the nutrients we need, we turn to the social sciences and the humanities when we want to understand what consumers mean when they talk about wanting to eat right, why people’s eating habits often don’t reflect scientific ideals, or how food consumers view new technologies. Together these papers show how important people’s values, beliefs, aspirations, and social context are to their dietary health. They compel us to acknowledge that the dietary challenges of the 21st century cannot be met using the tools of scientific investigation or social and cultural analysis alone and to pursue, therefore, just the kind of cross-disciplinary conversation that is exemplified by this session.

I teach courses that explore the cultural aspects of eating habits, and I frequently ask my students why they try to eat a healthy diet. Their answers typically include the following reasons: to live longer and avoid disease; to be sexy, attractive, or thin; to perform better in school, at work, or in sports; to show that they are educated, moral, or disciplined. Such responses clearly indicate that, for these students as it is for so many people, dietary health is a means to achieving goals that have nothing to

do with the biomedical health of the body. These responses show us that ideas about health express fundamental cultural values and complex individual aspirations. And they show us, therefore, why it is that questions about dietary health inevitably bring us to the intersection between science and culture.

Each of these papers explores an aspect of this intersection. Marika Lyly shows how people’s perceptions of whole grain and refined grain products are shaped by culture and vary by national context. Klaus Grunert makes it clear that while consumers do desire healthiness in their foods, that desire is shaped by other values and beliefs, such as the preference for naturalness. Using the case of artificial sweeteners as an example, Carolyn De La Pena shows that “health” can have many different meanings at the same time. Finally, Lotte Holme explores linkages between obesity and socioeconomic status that make it clear science alone cannot solve our dietary problems. Taken together, these investigations reveal striking tensions in consumer responses to healthy foods.

Sociologists of eating have long recognized that people have a fundamentally ambivalent relationship with food, and that this ambivalence produces anxiety. At the most basic level humans are anxious about food because we are omnivores, torn between neophilia (attraction to novelty) and neophobia (fear of the new).¹ Like other omnivores, humans have to constantly balance curiosity and caution as we make choices about what to eat. But sociologists

Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil point out that “the omnivore’s paradox” is but one of many tensions that inform our relationship with food. They argue that because humans, unlike other animals, “eat with the mind as much as the mouth” and are “immersed in the symbolic nuances of food,” there are at least three additional paradoxes that generate profound ambivalence, and anxiety, for food consumers. They point to the tension that is generated by the fact that food can provide pleasure and gratification, but can also bring displeasure and discomfort. They discuss a second tension related to the fact that food is the source of energy, life and health, but has the potential to introduce dangerous organisms into the body that can make the eater sick either tomorrow or many years in the future. And, finally, they point to the tension caused by an unavoidable ethical dilemma; while we must consume food to sustain our own lives, eating usually entails the death of other organisms.²

The tension of the omnivore’s dilemma and the three additional paradoxes that Beardsworth and Keil outline are at play in the particularly complex relationship between consumers and healthy foods. But the papers presented in this session also suggest that we may need a more refined notion of the paradoxes that shape consumer ambivalence, anxiety, and choice in the realm of health. Drawing from the papers by Lyly, Grunert, De La Pena, and Holme, I have identified three paradoxes related specifically to the challenges of providing food for health in the 21st century. These are the tensions between pleasure and health, technology and nature, innovation and nostalgia (see Table 1). They operate within individuals, who must navigate their competing pulls

as they make food choices, and between consumer subsets that skew in the direction of one pull or the other. The rest of this essay will explore each of these tensions in further detail.

A fundamental belief that healthy food is less pleasurable than unhealthy food prevails among many consumers. Marika Lyly shows that the consumption or rejection of whole grain products is shaped in part by this tension between pleasure and health, and Klaus Grunert, argues that the tension between taste and health is one of many that functional foods must address and reconcile. The tension between health and taste that Grunert and Lyly discuss is very clearly manifest among American consumers, who tend to see two priorities—pleasure and health—as fundamentally opposed. Advertisements promoting foods that taste good and are also good for you exemplify this formidable cultural tension as they attempt to overcome it. Carol Counihan’s study of “food rules” among American college students in the United States confirms the importance of this belief. Counihan found that while students are generally aware of the rules of scientific nutrition and can provide elaborate lists of “good for you” foods, their eating habits rarely conform to these rules. Instead, they live by a series of what Counihan describes as “rules to break rules.”³ They enact a structured rebellion against what they have learned about nutrition in school and from their families; that bad-tasting foods are “good for you” and good tasting foods are “bad for you.” Students eat “badly,” Counihan argues, because they love so-called bad foods, define them as “treats,” and consider the eating of bad foods a consolation and reward.³ Deborah Lupton, who conducted interviews

Table 1. The paradoxical nature of consumer relationships with healthy foods

Tension	Opposing beliefs and values	
1. Pleasure/health	Consumers seek pleasure in food, and think “good-tasting” foods are bad for them.	Consumers seek healthy foods, and think “good for them” foods taste bad.
2. Technology/nature	Consumers seek technological innovation that will promote health (neophilia).	Consumers fear technology and associate purity and naturalness with health (neophobia).
3. Innovation/nostalgia	Consumers seek solutions to health problems through scientific and technical innovation.	Consumers seek solutions to health problems through a return to a “simpler,” more “natural past”.

and focus groups with Australian adults, also found that people's dietary habits were shaped by the pleasure/health tension. Her subjects described healthy foods as those that "should" be eaten because they are nutritious, even though other foods are more desirable and pleasurable. One man explained that he "almost puked" the first time he tried meusli, but "forced [himself] to like it. . .for health reasons." Another explained, "If you have the choice between eating a piece of chocolate and fresh vegetables, you should take the fresh vegetables even though you might get more enjoyment from some chocolate."⁴

The pleasure–health paradox is even more complicated, and significant, because while consumers "break the rules" to indulge in delicious "treats," they remain invested in the ideal of self-denial, and maintain the belief that choosing bad tasting foods that are good for you is important not only for physical well-being, but also character and morality. This is particularly true in the United States, where autonomy and individualism are highly valued and the ability to exercise self-control is seen as a key aspect of mature personhood and moral character. Because people view eating healthy foods as requiring self-control, they associate it with virtue. While American consumers seem eager to have the tension between pleasure and health reconciled through technological innovation and product development that deliver indulgent healthy foods, they don't really feel like they are indulging if a food is healthy, and they don't really want healthy food that does not involve at least a little bit of sacrifice and self-denial.

The kind of innovation that might make available new varieties of healthy foods also has to contend with the second of our three tensions; the tension between technological solutions and consumer preference for naturalness. As Klaus Grunert argues in his paper, this is a key issue in the acceptance of functional foods. It builds directly on the competing pulls of neophilia and neophobia familiar to all omnivores. When it comes to health, the consumer who "eats with the mind" is both drawn to the promise of technology and, fearing it as unfamiliar and potentially harmful, looks toward the reassuring familiarity and presumed purity of nature. Grunert's subjects reported preferring food that is "pure," to which nothing has been "added," and one explained that functional foods made her "think of food being injected with a syringe." As Lupton points out, nature is symbolically connected to notions of "pu-

riety" and "goodness." Many of her informants described the healthiness of food in relation to how much it had been processed or cooked, and they considered foods closest to their raw state as the healthiest. Morality comes into play here as well, as eating natural food seems to offer or express a kind of virtue.⁴ The idea that natural food is healthy and virtuous is leveraged by food marketers who employ the poorly defined concept of "natural" to create an appealing "health halo."⁵ But of course the presumed correlation between health and nature is cultural and symbolic, not scientific and factual. As Lupton points out, the link between health and nature is a constructed one that obscures the fact, for example, that many foods contain naturally occurring toxins that are removed by processing, and many fruits and vegetables that seem totally natural are grown using chemicals.⁴

Our reverence for nature and things that seem natural is closely connected with a related belief that life was healthier and more wholesome during a "golden age" in which people lived on the land in rural or farm areas, worked hard, and ate hearty meals that were cooked by a devoted mother and enjoyed at the family table. This nostalgia for an imagined golden age pervades consumer beliefs about healthy food, and has a particularly important impact on beliefs about where solutions for contemporary problems in dietary health should come from and what the future will look like. Though the papers in today's session did not address it, the innovation/nostalgia paradox should be considered among the key tensions shaping consumer responses to healthy foods. Historian Warren Belasco traces the history of ideas about the future of food and describes two distinct types of proposals (and fantasies) for how we might manage to feed the world's continuously expanding population in the future. On the one hand, there are "technological fixes" that employ science and engineering to make food safe and abundant in the future. On the other, there are what he calls "anthropological fixes," scenarios in which people change their values and expectations and return to the lifestyle of the (imagined) past in order to cope with the challenges of providing healthy food for a growing world population.⁶ A similar tension informs people's ideas about solutions to contemporary problems in dietary health.

Two articles that recently appeared in the *New York Times*—on the very same day—exemplify the

innovation–nostalgia tension and also show how intertwined and, in reality, inseparable, the three tensions highlighted in this essay are. They also remind us how important it is that we take the paradoxes of food and health into consideration as we map out our own vision for the future of food. One article was titled “Superfood or Monster from the Deep” and, as the headline suggests, it explored the potential of functionally enhanced foods and played with consumer ambivalence about the new technologies; the tensions between innovation on the one hand and both naturalness and nostalgia on the other. The article stirred up anxieties related to the paradoxes by describing a scenario in which the American breakfast retains its traditional structure and appearance, but delivers additional omega-3s derived from sardines and anchovies in the form of Tropicana Healthy Heart orange juice and Wonder Headstart bread. It explored a future in which functional foods might make the entire food supply more nutritious, and asked questions that are on the mind of many consumers: “Are we really that close to a world in which food functions as a nutrient deliver system, made possible by microencapsulation and fine-spray coating? And what would this mean for food and human nutrition?” The article outlined the potential benefits of this possible future and described some of the issues involved, such as skepticism about whether nutritional benefits survive in additive form, and concerns related to labeling and health claims. Overall, the article strikes at the heart of the innovation–nostalgia paradox, marveling at the potential for scientific innovation to improve dietary health on the one hand, and recoiling into nostalgia for a simpler (and more natural) past on the other.⁷

The second article that appeared that day began by announcing that “after decades of obsessing about fat, calories, and carbs, many dieters have made the unorthodox decision to simply enjoy food again.” Titled, “Instead of Eating to Diet, They’re Eating to Enjoy,” the article explored the health–pleasure paradox, and portrayed a vision for the future of dietary health based on resisting scientific innovation and embracing eating styles that, as much as possible, resemble the premodern. The article described a segment of consumers who are dieting less, eating more organic foods and whole grains, cooking from scratch, and shopping at farmers’ markets. Many have been influenced by lumi-

naries in the world of food, such as Alice Waters, who advocates for the future of food as a return to a more natural, pleasurable, and healthy past.⁸ (Waters is also known for her passion for cooking over an open hearth and calls the mortar and pestle her favorite kitchen implement.)⁹ As the *New York Times* articles point out, Waters is also a major proponent of the Slow Food Movement, an international “eco-gastronomic movement” that aims to reclaim the simplicity, biodiversity, and pace of food eras past.⁸ This is the alternative future that Belasco discussed, where consumers reject technological fixes and instead embrace changes in values and behaviors that they believe will bring back a healthier, more wholesome past. The opposing pulls of these two scenarios for the future of food will likely result in a variety of real-world compromises. As Belasco points out, technological solutions to dietary problems will probably not be accepted unless they also manage to appeal to nostalgia for the premodern. In other words, as Belasco argues, they will have to look and taste more or less like they were made by someone’s grandmother, real or imagined.⁶

The paradoxes of dietary health identified here take place in a social and cultural context that exacerbates consumer anxieties about what to eat. The recent popularity of books telling people how to navigate the complex world of dietary choice certainly attests to the fact that many consumers are scared, confused, and conflicted.^{10–12} Claude Fischler explains that in traditional societies “the social and cultural framework of eating habits is remarkably stable, rigid, almost coercive.”¹³ Dietary options are limited by season and geography, modes of coping with health problems are trusted rather than debated, and established cuisines and customs offer clear guidance about what is good to eat. But in contemporary industrial societies the situation is quite different. Consumers are confronted with a bewildering array of unfamiliar foods that are produced in far off places using foreign processes, unfamiliar ingredients, and invisible additives. And they must make choices about what to eat in the absence of clear sociocultural cues. Food choices are increasingly individual rather than social decisions, and individuals “lack reliable criteria to make these choices and therefore they experience a growing sense of anxiety.”¹³

In response to this phenomenon, which Fischler calls “gastro-anomy,” new ways of establishing a

coherent framework for making dietary choices are emerging. Various forms of “food sectarianism,”—such as veganism or raw foodism—play a role in the process, as does the “reidentification of foods” through detailed labeling and reassuring guarantees of purity and quality (such as organic or fair trade labels).² But scientific and commercial forces also have a role to play in assuaging anxieties related to the paradoxes of eating. As we envision a roadmap for dietary health in the 21st century, we might think about providing healthy foods in a way that takes into account consumer ambivalence about eating in general and about healthy food in particular, and the need for reassuring frameworks within which consumers can eat with confidence.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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